

Just Another Brick in the Wall? The Relationship Between Classroom-Based Political Education and the Political Interest of Young Adults in Switzerland

Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen
University of Berne
Isabelle.stadelmann@ipw.unibe.ch

and

Linda Sulzer
ETH Zurich
lsulzer@ethz.ch

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Abstract

This article asks whether political education at upper secondary school – i.e., shortly before or at the age when young people receive the right to vote – affects individual political interest as well as differences in political interest between social groups. Empirically, we use a novel data set combining individual student data with information on classroom-based political education as well as teacher characteristics. We do not find support for a more or less automatic and positive effect of classroom-based political education on young people's political interest. Whereas we analyzed three dimensions of political education (*knowledge, skills, arousing interest in politics*), the skills dimension was the only one that exhibited a consistent positive (and mostly significant) relationship with young peoples' political interest. Moreover, classroom-based political education seems not to compensate for a lack of political socialization at home but rather tends to affect students with politically interested parents most strongly.

Introduction

Increased attention has been paid to the declining turnout rates and political disengagement of young adults. Whereas it has widely been demonstrated that young people are not apathetic in general (Henn and Foard 2012; Sloam 2012) but rather use more diversified and ‘unconventional’ channels to get politically engaged (Norris 2002), several authors argue that the alienation of young people from conventional forms of political participation is problematic. In particular, the systematic underrepresentation of the youngest age groups in electoral politics offends the democratic principle of equality but also implies that the interests of those bearing the future consequences of today’s political decisions are not adequately integrated into the political process (see Brady et al. 1995; Franklin 2004; Lijphart 1997; Verba 1996; Wattenberg 2016). In this vein, Blais and Rubenson (2013, see also Wattenberg 2016) provide evidence that the generational gap in electoral democracy is the result of a culture value change with younger people being less interested in politics and conceiving voting as a choice rather than a civic duty.

This observation is the starting point of the present study that examines whether political socialization at the upper secondary school level—i.e., shortly before or at the age when young people receive the right to vote—influences individual political interest. The focus on political interest seems reasonable, since political interest has been found to be the crucial predictor of (subsequent) political (non-)participation (Galston 2001: 224; Lupia and Philpot 2005; Popkin and Dimock 1999:142). Moreover, self-reported and even hypothetical participation have been shown to systematically overestimate real political involvement, and therefore may not be a reliable indicator for capturing young peoples’ future political involvement. Finally, the development of political interest is an understudied area in the political participation literature (Dostie-Goulet 2009; Prior 2010).

The importance of civic education has been emphasized since Tocqueville, and, mainly in the U.S. context, has provoked an accumulation of studies on the effects of civic education at school on young people's political engagement (Campbell 2005; Feldman et al. 2007; Niemi and Junn 1998; Torney-Purta 2002). However, research related to the European context is rare (Manning and Edwards 2014; for exceptions mainly on the Belgium case see Claes and Hooghe 2017; Hooghe and Dassonneville 2013; Quintelier 2010). One important challenge is the lack of systematic and comparative data on how political education is practiced within school education.

Against this background, the contribution of this paper is at least threefold. First, *theoretically*, we use Verba et al.'s (1995, 2001) Civic Voluntarism Model not only to explain the relevance of political education for young peoples' political involvement, but also more explicitly to uncover the potential mechanisms that link the two phenomena. Thus, we contribute to earlier research in which "the mechanisms at work [...] remain[ed] hidden" (Niemi and Junn 1998: 122; see also Campbell 2005). In particular, we discuss how classroom-based political education may specifically influence an individual's capacity and willingness to participate—two factors that are at the core of the previously mentioned model. Second, *conceptually*, to measure classroom-based political education, we rely on a content analysis of specific teaching curricula about political education. We conceptualize the crucial concept, *political education*, rather broadly not only as imparting *knowledge* on political issues and developing *political skills* (i.e., Brady et al. 1995), but also as providing *motivation for* and *sensitization to* politics (see Campbell 2012; Castillo et al. 2015; Claes and Hooghe 2017). Unlike previous research, this data enables us to investigate the role of classroom-based political education with a systematic and comparable measure rather than more subjective indicators such as self-reported course attendance or classroom climate and discussions (e.g., Castillo et al. 2015; Claes and Hooghe 2017; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996;

Hooghe and Dassonneville 2013; Quintelier 2010, Torney-Purta 2002). Third, *empirically*, we make use of an original data set of roughly 4,000 students in their last year of upper secondary education from 270 classes in 25 Swiss cantons. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that the relationship between political education at school and youth political interest is systematically analyzed for the Swiss case—The few existing studies on the role of political school education take a pedagogical perspective, focusing on hypothetical participation and/or on younger children (Fatke and Niklowitz 2003; Schulz et al. 2010). This lack of research is astonishing in a country where political education seems to be of particular relevance given its direct democratic and rather complex political system (Lutz and Selb 2006: 480; Moser-Lécho 1996: 10ff.; Reichenbach 1999). While (comparative) data on youth political participation in Switzerland is very scarce (Rothenbühler et al. 2012), recent analyses based on survey as well as registered participation data consistently confirm, indeed, that young people in Switzerland exhibit an under-average level of political participation (Lutz 2016; Tawfik et al. 2012).

The paper is organized as follows. First, we turn to the theoretical background of our analyses, particularly on how and through which channels political education at school may affect an individual's political interest. We further discuss how political education at school may also influence different groups of pupils in different ways. Next, we describe our data, the methodological approach, and the operationalization of the variables. In the fourth section, we present the empirical results. We then conclude with a summary of the most important findings and conclusions.

Theoretical Background

Since Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), a lack of political interest has been identified as one crucial factor that prevents individuals from participating in the electoral process. Following

Van Deth (1990: 278), we define *political interest* as the degree to which “politics arouses citizens’ curiosity.” In this respect, political interest can be seen as an element of a person’s political identity typically developed during adolescence, which speaks to the relevance of analyzing political interest in the context of young peoples’ school education and (political) socialization (Prior 2010: 748f.).

Political Education at School as an Important Socialization Context

Despite the fact that Tocqueville (1969: 304f.) had already emphasized the importance of civic education for future political engagement, the issue took a back seat in political and educational research for a long time. The scholarly consensus continued to question the efficacy of the empirical relationship between political education and individual political knowledge and efficacy (Langton and Jennings 1968). However, by the 1990s when the influence of political education regained attention, several studies revealed a positive impact of civic education on students’ political engagement (Denver and Hands 1990; Galston 2004, 2001; Niemi and Junn 1998; Niemi et al. 2000). In particular, the merits of civic education in terms of increased political interest and knowledge have been underlined (Campbell 2005; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993; Feldman et al. 2007; Niemi and Junn 1998; Torney-Purta 2002). Most recently, it has been emphasized that the role of schools should be conceptualized broadly, i.e., political education at school may not only impart political knowledge but rather stimulates more general civic learning opportunities and attitudinal processes that may particularly contribute to the development of young people’s civic skills and political sensitization (Campbell 2012; Castillo et al. 2015: 17; Claes and Hooghe 2017; Kahne et al. 2013; Quintelier 2010).

This renewed interest in civic education can be seen in the context of the “rebirth of political socialization” (Niemi and Hepburn 1995), which generally puts a stronger focus on

different socialization agents, the school being one of them (Almond and Verba 1963; Hahn 1998; Hess and Torney 1967). In this view, individuals, and particularly young people, develop their political knowledge and skills by interacting in different socialization contexts, i.e., with their family and friends, in civic organizations, or at school (Dostie-Goulet 2009). The latter deserves particular attention, since school is mandatory for everybody, regardless of his or her individual social background (Osterwalder 2000: 61). Hence, it can be argued that political school education—unlike other socialization contexts—has the potential to reach almost all young people. Moreover, in school, different dimensions of political education can be integrated quite naturally. First, a school is an institution that per definition imparts knowledge, including political knowledge. Second, at school, students interact with and discuss ideas not only with their teachers but also with their peers, which is an ideal environment in which to develop civic and political skills. Finally, school education has the potential to heavily influence how students are motivated by and sensitized to political questions (Campbell 2012; Castillo et al. 2015: 17; Claes and Hooghe 2017; Dostie-Goulet 2009; Niemi and Junn 1998; Quintelier 2010; Torney-Purta 2002). In particular, for example, teachers can initiate political discussions or even organize “practical contact” with politics, which in turn are thought to motivate students politically (e.g., Campbell 2005; Pasek et al. 2008; Torney-Purta 2002).

The Theoretical Relationship Between Classroom-based Political Education and Young Peoples’ Political Involvement

However, whereas this focus on political socialization explains *why* classroom-based political education matters (Campbell 2005: 2), it does not tell us much about *how* this type of political education actually affects young peoples’ political involvement (Campbell 2005; Westheimer and Kahne 2004; Quintelier 2010). In this regard, we rely on one of the most prominent

approaches from political participation research, which provides important theoretical insights on possible mechanisms that could link classroom-based political education and individual political involvement. Verba et al.'s (1995, 2001) civic voluntarism model suggests that two main factors are relevant to conceptualizing the participatory processes: "the *motivation* and the *capacity* to take part in political life" (Verba et al. 1995: 4). Although others already have linked political education at school to this resource-related model (Quintelier 2010), we argue more explicitly that it also is exactly this *capacity* and *willingness* to participate that might be influenced by classroom-based political education. Therefore, we focus on these two aspects and discuss how political education at school may affect political interest by increasing the capacity and motivation to participate.

Increasing the Capacity to Participate

Citizens' capacity to participate in politics is strongly contingent on the resources an individual possesses. On the one hand, these are specific political capabilities, which include a basic *knowledge* about the political system, relevant actors, and the political process, and the ability to make decisions on political issues (self-efficacy). On the other hand, more general *civic skills* also are necessary resources for political involvement (Brady et al. 1995), which refer to the communicative and organizational capacities that facilitate effective political involvement.

Initially, many studies that have investigated the effect of classroom-based political education have focused on *political knowledge* (Galston 2001; Niemi and Junn 1998; Torney-Purta 2002). Political knowledge is seen as a crucial element of democratic citizenship that also promotes the support of democratic values (Galston 2001: 223). Quite obviously, classroom-based political education can be expected to affect political knowledge by informing students about the political system, political actors, and the political process.

As mentioned previously, and according to Verba et al. (1995: 271; 2001), general *civic skills* are important prerequisites to political interest and involvement, since these skills can facilitate engagement with and in politics. This view also supports authors like Galston (2001: 219) who argues that “all education is civic education.” While this generally speaks to the relevance of school-based education for political involvement, our main argument is more specific: It can be reasoned that a good political education at school will facilitate the transformation of general civic skills into political skills.

In conclusion, it can be assumed that political education at school fosters students’ civic skills and political knowledge, i.e., increases their capacity to participate, which in turn will be associated with a higher general interest in politics.ⁱ Political knowledge helps citizens to understand what their political interests are, how their political decisions impact these interests, and how their own interests can be promoted in the political process (Galston 2001: 223). At the same time, civic skills help to develop students’ capacities for political involvement by fostering their communicative and organizational skills.

Increasing the Motivation to Participate

Another reason for getting involved in the political process is a pure willingness to participate. In other words, regardless of whether an individual has gained the required resources, political involvement will not occur if she/he is not willing to participate (Teorell 2006). In this context, *motivation* can be referred to as one’s desire to engage with politics, which also is related to whether political participation is expected by the environment or by norms or tradition. McAllister (1998) argues that beyond the basic aim of political education—to impart knowledge about the political system and increase basic civic skills—the “more ambitious goal” is the promotion of active citizenship, which includes a rising political awareness and eventually interest in political issues (see also Claes and Hooghe

2017). We therefore conclude that classroom-based political education may affect political interest by stimulating students' desire to get politically involved, and by emphasizing the norms of democratic citizenship.

Hypotheses on Political Education and Students' Political Interest

Based on the previous discussion about the capacity and willingness to get politically involved, we derive the hypothesis that classroom-based political education positively affects political interest. Classroom-based political education positively influences political knowledge and civic skill, which will enhance students' capacity to participate and thus their political interest. Moreover, political education can increase political interest by stimulating the motivation or the sense of duty for politics and political participation. Thus, although two different mechanisms may be at work, empirically they are interlinked. Galston (2001: 224), for instance, has shown that political knowledge and civic skills (*capacity*) are associated with support for democratic values, e.g., politics is something one should bother about and get involved in (*motivation*). For this reason, we formulate one hypothesis that subsumes both mechanisms:

H1: Classroom-based political education increases students' political interest.

While earlier studies often have treated young people as a more or less homogeneous group, recently, some have argued that political interest among young people, and also the relationship between political socialization at school and young citizens' political involvement, might be complex and, in particular, group-specific (Henn and Foard 2014: 362). For example, political education at school may not have a general positive influence on the political interest and participation of young people; rather, it may promote the political involvement of specific groups and thereby moderate the equality of political participation (Niemi and Junn 1998; Quintelier 2010; Zeglovits and Zandonella 2013). This seems to be a

plausible assumption given that the initial level of political resources has been shown to vary between subgroups (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). In this respect, and following the literature on educational inequality, it could be argued that political education at school may *compensate for a lack of resources at home* (e.g., Stadelmann-Steffen 2012; Downey et al. 2004). From this perspective, and reconsidering the literature on socialization agents (e.g., Dostie-Goulet 2009), we would expect that political education will most strongly influence students with low levels of political socialization at home. Eventually, this influence could mean that classroom-based political education will equalize political interest between student groups with different family backgrounds of political socialization.

In contrast to this reasoning, however, educational research has concluded that school education may not always realize its expected equalizing effect; instead, in some situations, it may even reinforce existent inequalities. Privileged children not only often attend schools with higher resource levels (Condrón and Rosciogno 2003), but also tend to be assigned to higher tracks and ability groups, exhibit better interactions with teachers (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), and are more likely to possess the cognitive attention span needed to remain attentive throughout the school day and thus profit more from the school environment (Stadelmann-Steffen 2012). Put differently, evidence exists that seems to support the assumption that classroom-based political education may in the first place influence those students that have advantageous conditions to start with, while students who lack a minimum initial level of political socialization will profit to a lower degree from classroom-based political education. Similar mechanisms have been reported in political participation research—for example, information provision during political campaigns most strongly reaches and thus affects individuals with rather high initial levels of political involvement (Holbrook and McClurg 2005; Lipsitz et al. 2005).

These diverse reflections clearly lead to a theoretical expectation that the effect of classroom-based political education may be group-specific, and therefore, will moderate the degree of inequality in political interest between groups. However, whether classroom-based political education is related to higher or lower inequalities is theoretically ambiguous. For this reason, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: Classroom-based political education moderates the inequality in political interest between groups with different levels of political socialization at home.

Research Design and Measurement

We make use of an original data set of 4,271 students from 285 classes in 25 Swiss cantons. The students we surveyed were in their last year of secondary education (vocational education and training or gymnasium). This age cohort seems most suitable for analyzing the effects of classroom-based political education on political interest, since young people at this age have just received or are about to receive the right to vote, meaning that their initial political socialization is about to be accomplished. Additionally, young people at this age still are embedded in the school context, so potential school effects are still part of their everyday life. Moreover, Niemi and Junn (1998), for instance, have found that civic education at this stage has a stronger impact on active citizenship than this kind of education provided at earlier stages.

To assess our hypotheses, we applied multilevel regression models that account for the fact that students are nested within school classes (Steenbergen and Jones 2002). The random intercept models also enable us to consistently estimate the relationship between classroom-level variables (classroom-based political education) and outcomes at the individual level, i.e.

individual political interest (ibid.). Since the Swiss education system is highly decentralized (Hega 2000: 1), we also integrate another random intercept for cantons, which results in a three-level model with students nested in classes, nested in cantons. In the following sections, we describe our data and the dependent and independent variables in more detail.

Students' Data

We applied two stratification criteria for the sampling of the classes. First, we considered the distinction between general education (gymnasium) and vocational education and training (VET).ⁱⁱ In addition to the varying educational aims of general and vocational education, another important difference in our context is that the former is a full-time school education, whereas students in the latter attend school only one to two days a week.ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, this difference could affect the time spent on political education and thus its impact. Second, we stratified the sample by canton, not least of all to account for the high cantonal autonomy in upper secondary education, and the varying relevance of vocational and general education in the two main language regions. In this vein, and depending on the cantonal population size, we defined the number of schools and classes in each canton. In each canton, we selected at least one school per type (i.e., vocational and general education) with 3 to 4 classes. Wherever possible, within the cantons, we randomly chose the schools; however, this random approach was not always possible, for example, since some of the smaller cantons only have one gymnasium. To recruit schools and classes, we initially contacted the cantonal administration, i.e., the responsible persons for vocational and general education. In most cantons, the administration supported our project and either declared participation mandatory or at least recommended participation to their schools. In 25 out of 26 cantons, we had the opportunity to survey at least four classes per canton.^{iv} In larger cantons, we replaced schools randomly in case of a refusal to participate. Our case selection within a school was guided

mainly by research pragmatic factors (in particular by the possibility of surveying classes in one school on the same day). However, we aimed to cover classes from different occupations (in vocational schools) and areas of concentration^v (in gymnasiums), as well as the distinction between standard vocational education and training (VET) and the federal vocational baccalaureate (FVB). The latter is an extended general education to supplement a standard VET program that allows for direct admission to higher (tertiary) professional education and training. Hence, it is important to note that we do not have a random sample. However, our final sample incorporates the most important distinctive lines in Swiss upper secondary education with respect to educational track and language region (see table 1), and also covers the great diversity regarding professional and educational areas of specialization.

--- Table 1 about here ---

Measuring Classroom-Based Political Education

With respect to international comparisons of political education, different approaches exist. For example, in the United States, *civic education* is an integral part of the school system curriculum and is taught in a separate civic education program. A second model can be found, for instance in Britain, where civic education is integrated into a wide range of subjects within the curriculum (McAllister 1998). Political education in Switzerland typically follows this second model—political education is not a school subject on its own, but is considered a multidisciplinary topic integrated into the different subjects of the curriculum. Moreover, where and to what extent political education is integrated in the curricula varies between cantons, school types, and sometimes even areas of specialization/occupation. This diversity makes a measurement of political education inherently difficult.

Therefore, we relied on a unique data set containing comparative information on whether and to what extent political education is present in the school curricula collected by means of qualitative content analysis (Koller 2016; Stadelmann-Steffen et al. 2016). We have this data for all classes surveyed. Thus, we distinguish three dimensions of political education: *political knowledge*, *political skills*, and *arousing interest for politics* (see Table 2). We measured these three dimensions with various indicators (see Appendix I for detailed information about operationalization and measurement) and then aggregated the results into three indexes and z-standardised them. So the value of 0 stands for a medium integration of the respective dimension in a curriculum, while the negative values represent under-average, and the positive values reflect an over-average significance of this dimension.

--- Table 2 about here ---

Individual and Other Class-Level Variables

The dependent variable in our study is students' political interest. To depict this concept in as detailed a manner as possible, we used an index of five different survey items that asked about the interests of respondents in international, national, cantonal, and local politics, as well as in politics in general. Each of these variables provided an indicator from (0) (not at all interested) to (3) (very interested) with two intermediate categories. By constructing an additive index of these items, we were able to map the students' political interest considering the fact that political interest can manifest at different levels. Accordingly, the variable created contained values from (0) (no interest at all) to (15) (very interested at all levels).

Our crucial explanatory variable at the individual level is political socialization at home, which we capture through parents' general political interest. The variable amounts to

the mean value of mother's and father's general political interest as reported by their children (ranging from 1 [not at all interested] to 4 [very interested]). Of course, self-reported variables may be subject to measurement errors, e.g., influenced by a student's adjustments or a lack of knowledge, which needs to be considered when interpreting the results. However, for the purpose of our study, this approach may even be advantageous: It can be assumed that parents will most strongly influence their children if the latter *perceive* them as politically interested. The fact that children report their parents to be politically interested implies that the parents express their interest in daily life which is, thus, visible for their children. In this vein, we argue that the level of parental political interest as reported by their children is a good proxy for the "politicization" of a student's home, i.e., correlating with aspects of political socialization such as discussing political issues and the availability of political information, but mostly as a sensitization for politics. To additionally include the family educational background, in the model we also considered two dummies representing the parents' educational background (again as reported by the students): one accounting for low and one for high levels of parental education, respectively.^{vi}

With respect to the individual level, we also incorporated further personal characteristics of the surveyed students, such as age, gender, nationality (also representing whether an individual is or soon will be entitled to vote), and political identity. The target group of our survey were students in their last year of upper secondary education (i.e., at the age of 18 to 19). Since not all students had reached the voting age when we conducted our survey, we created a dummy variable for respondents below 18 years to capture whether they had not yet reached the voting age. We included sex and nationality as dummy variables, and used male and non-Swiss students as reference categories. To include the impact of political ideology, we relied on a left-right self-placement, i.e., we included a dummy for right and one for left political identification (a middle position served as the reference category). Since a

substantial part of these young respondents were not able yet to place themselves politically, we included another dummy to capture the politically undecided.

In addition to our crucial individual indicators of political education discussed previously (*political knowledge, political skills, and arousing interest*), we also controlled for language region at the class level. This is the most accurate level of measurement, due to the bilingual cantons and cities in Switzerland. The dummy variable has the values of (1) for German and (0) for French and Italian-speaking classes. Even more important with respect to the classroom level, we also distinguished between the three crucial school types in upper secondary education, i.e., general education, vocational education, and training with and without FVB. Finally, we also considered some teacher information in our models. More precisely, we included their gender and self-reported political interest. Both variables were operationalized just like the according variables for the students.

More detailed information on the variables and their operationalization, as well as summary statistics can be found in Appendix II.

Empirical Results

Initial analyses not presented here demonstrate that the larger part of the variance in individual political interest can be found, not surprisingly, at the individual level. However, more than 8% of the total variance comes from the class level, which corroborates our assumption that political interest among young people is not independent from the classroom context. In contrast, while conceptually relevant, almost no cantonal variance exists with respect to political interest once differences between classes are modelled.

The findings in Figure 1 reveal that individual characteristics are strongly related to individual political interest. Most of these findings are in accordance with earlier studies from

other contexts (e.g., Dostie-Goulet 2009; Henn and Foard 2014) and older age cohorts (e.g., Brady et al. 1995; Coffé and Bolzendahl 2010; Lutz 2016). In particular, being Swiss and male, and having parents with a high political interest are related to higher levels of student political interest, whereas low parental education is associated with low political interest. Moreover, a clear right or left ideological self-placement is associated with higher political interest compared to a middle political position. In contrast, students who do not know where to place themselves politically exhibit lower political interest. The same finding applies to students below the age of 18, i.e., before they receive the right to vote. Even if this latter coefficient just fails to reach standard levels of statistical significance, these findings might point to a peculiarity of young people's political interest compared to findings from the overall population. The age of 18, and thus the moment when students receive the right to vote, seems to be a turning point for political socialization and obviously for political interest. More precisely, before this age, a substantial number of young people is not able to place themselves politically (Beyeler et al. 2015), which seems to go hand in hand with lower political interest. This finding corroborates the relevance of studying this age cohort.

--- Figure 1 about here ---

In contrast, the teacher variables are not related to students' political interest. Hence, while previous research has documented that teachers may influence the political attitudes of their students (Bar-Tal and Harel 2002)—a factor often evaluated negatively in the public debate—our results do not support the idea that politically interested teachers motivate their students to become more interested in politics.

However, our main interest concerns the variables related to classroom-based political education. In Model 1, two of the three variables that account for the degree to which the

political education is present in the teaching curricula, are statistically significant. In other words, the more extensively defined political skills are in the curricula, the higher is the political interest of the respective students. In contrast, however, and somewhat surprisingly, the more strongly the imparting of political knowledge is in the curricula, the lower is the students' political interest. Even when controlling for school type, language region, and teacher effects (Models 2 and 3), this negative coefficient seems to be rather robust. The political skill dimension remains significant at the 10% level across the models as well, but loses some of its relevance. By contrast, the third dimension of political education—arousing interest for politics—is not statistically related to students' political interest, which may be due to the fact that this aspect of political education is generally the least developed dimension in the school curricula.

Table 3 shows that the negative coefficient of the knowledge dimension may be driven by a school type-specific constellation of political education and students' general level of political interest. For example, teaching curricula regarding political education systematically vary between school types. Although the curricula of standard VET strongly emphasize political education with respect to the knowledge dimension, this aspect of political education exhibits very low values in the teaching curricula of general education (as well as in the curricula of VET with FVB). Given that students in general education exhibit a higher mean level of political interest (mean political interest in general education = 8.8 vs. 7.9 in standard VET), this pattern may explain the negative coefficient of the knowledge dimension.

Moreover, other school type-specific models (Appendix III) reveal that the negative coefficient of the knowledge dimension can be found mainly with regards to standard VET, whereas within the two tracks with higher educational aspirations, a basically zero-relationship exists.^{vii} However, whereas these school type-specific models imply that classroom-based political education may have varying impacts depending on the educational

track, strictly speaking, none of the coefficients of these separate three models are statistically significant, which may be due to the low number of observations per educational track.

--- Table 3 about here ---

Our results so far provide only limited support for a general fostering effect of extensive classroom-based political education on students' political interest (as suggested in Hypothesis 1). Whereas the findings imply that a lengthy description of the knowledge-related aspects of political education in school curricula might, in some cases, even be detrimental to the development of students' political interest, the analyses lead to the conclusion that a strong reliance on the development of students' political skills in the curriculum is conducive to young people's capacity and motivation to get involved in politics.

As elaborated in our theoretical section, we assume that the role of political socialization at home could be moderated by classroom-based political education (Hypothesis 2). In the next step, to test for such group-specific effects, we estimate the interaction effects between political education at school and parents' levels of political interest.

Figure 2 illustrates that political education, as described in the teaching curricula, may indeed moderate the association between parental and students' political interest as suggested in Hypothesis 2.^{viii} With respect to the knowledge dimension, we find that more extensive teaching curricula tend to decrease the influence of parental political interest. More precisely, and similar to previous models, a strong emphasis on imparting knowledge is related to lower levels of political interest if parents exhibit high levels of political interest. By contrast, the political interest of students with a less politicised background is not significantly associated with the knowledge dimension.

--- Figure 2 about here ---

The latter conclusion applies also to the skills dimension of political education. However, although the association between political education and individual political interest is positive for all groups, this marginal effect is statistically significant only for students from a politicized background. In other words, in contrast to the knowledge dimension, skills-related political education goes along with *higher* levels of political interest if students have politically interested parents.

Last, regarding the dimension *arousing interest for politics*, the interaction effect just fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Figure 2 illustrates that for all levels of parental political interest, this aspect of political education is not significantly related to students' political interest.

Overall, our findings imply that a strong integration of political education into the teaching curricula is significantly related to the political interest of those students that have politically interested parents. By contrast, evidence does not exist that classroom-based political education substantially reaches students who probably would need it most, i.e., those with politically uninterested parents. Moreover, even the students with politically interested parents do not generally profit from political education at school: whereas a focus on political skills seems to increase their level of political interest, a strong focus on imparting political knowledge has a detrimental effect on these students.

These findings not only corroborate Hypothesis 2, but also shed some light on the theoretical ambiguity previously discussed. In the theoretical section, we showed that it is unclear theoretically whether rather disadvantaged or advantaged groups most strongly profit from classroom-based political education. Our results lend support to the view that political

education mainly influences those students who already have a certain level of political socialization, whereas support does not exist for a compensation effect of political education at school. However, in contrast to expectations, and due to the negative relationship between the knowledge dimension and political interest, this phenomenon does not lead necessarily to greater inequalities in political interest between social groups.

Conclusion

The present study asked whether classroom-based political education at the upper secondary school level—i.e., shortly before or at the age when young people receive the right to vote—influences students' political interest. The main findings of this study are summarized as follows.

First, the school context matters with respect to political interest. More precisely, political interest significantly differs between the two main pillars of upper secondary education: students in general education are more strongly interested in politics than their counterparts in vocational education. Whereas some of these differences are surely due to compositional and self-selection effects, we do not know, based on our analyses, how much of this difference is actually “produced” during upper secondary education. In contrast, we did not find any teacher effects. In particular, politically interested teachers do not seem to stimulate the political interest of their students.

Second, the results regarding our central explanatory concept, *classroom-based political education*, suggest that teaching curricula that emphasize and clearly describe classroom-based political education do not increase students' political interest in a more or less automatic way. On the one hand, whereas we analyzed three dimensions of political

education (*knowledge, skills, arousing interest in politics*), the skills dimension was the only one that exhibited a consistent positive (and mostly significant) relationship with young peoples' political interest. This result is in accordance with recent empirical finding stressing the relevance of civic learning opportunities (Kahne et al. 2013: 432). Theoretically, the findings moreover corroborate resource-based models of political participation research—such as the civic voluntarism model—that assign an important role to political and civil skills not only in terms of an individual's *capacity* to get politically involved, but also with regards to the *motivation and sensitization* for politics (Brady et al. 1005; Verba et al. 1995, 2001). Conversely, for the two other dimensions, the estimations did not produce significant coefficients (*arousing interest*) or even pointed to a negative relationship with students' political interest (*knowledge*). On the other hand, classroom-based political education seems not to affect all students in the same way. In accordance with previous educational research (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Condron and Rosciogno 2003; Stadelmann-Steffen 2012), our analyses show that classroom-based political education does not compensate for a lack of political resources at home, and tends to affect those students most who have politically interested parents, i.e., those who most probably are already politically socialized at home.

Although our findings are based on data from only one country, we argue that they may be relevant beyond the Swiss case. In fact, the focus on Switzerland enabled us to integrate the two main types of skill formation in upper secondary education—vocational education and training as well as general education—which means that conceptually and empirically, our study speaks to different educational systems. At the same time, the great variety of ways that political education is integrated into the teaching curricula not only between educational tracks, but also between schools and classrooms, supports the view that to study the relationship between political school education and students' political involvement, the classroom level might be the most reasonable level of analysis. This

approach might also be relevant to a more centralized educational system in which the general rules are set more centrally, but the implementation of political school education still occurs in the classroom.

Finally, in terms of scientific and practical implications, the present study suggests that classroom-based political education has the potential to increase young people's political interest, but it is clearly no sure-fire success (see also Manning and Edwards 2014). In other words, both scientifically and practically, more efforts are needed to think about a more effective conceptualization and implementation of political education at school (Campbell 2012). This concern is most clearly demonstrated by our findings regarding the knowledge dimension, which imply that we also should not completely rule out the possibility that classroom-based political education could actually negatively affect the political interest of some students. More positively framed, the seemingly negative findings presented in this study may point to some important aspects to be considered when researching and developing political education frameworks in the future. A first such implication might be that lengthy school curricula that only mention a long list of issues to be covered, but fail to tell teachers *why* political education is important, might negatively influence teachers' willingness to engage in political education in the classroom. Hence, how the aspects of political education—as described in the teaching curricula—are actually translated into the classroom is primary, which shifts attention to the role of teachers. Moreover, political education that strongly focuses on imparting political knowledge, but does not link this knowledge to real-world politics and developments, probably will not be successful in motivating students' political interest; instead, this approach most likely will activate feelings of annoyance, in particular in students who already have some initial political knowledge. Conversely, the conceptualization and implementation of teaching curricula needs to specifically take into account differences in “starting levels,” i.e., how classroom-based political education can

reach students that lack political socialization at home, while not discouraging those who already have some initial knowledge. More generally, this shows to also consider and investigate how concepts and instruments of political education are perceived by students. In this vein, a stronger focus on the dimension *arousing interest*, which has not received much attention in the teaching curricula or the scientific and public debate, seems promising. This dimension of political education could provide the seemingly missing link between (theoretical) knowledge and its relevance to becoming an active citizen. In the course of recent reforms of the teaching curricula of the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate (FVB) in Switzerland, this aspect of political education has indeed received a much more prominent role. This change may create opportunities for future research to investigate the role of this third dimension of political education in more detail.

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Notes

ⁱ It must be mentioned that some authors have emphasized that a reversed, endogenous or reciprocal relationship between political knowledge and political interest may exist (Dalton 1984; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 175; Kahne et al. 2013). In our view, this claim does not substantially disturb our main research interest. Whether a causal link exists from political education to skills to interest, or whether skills and interests are just correlated are not so much of relevance. Moreover, since all students in one class are exposed to the same political education, self-selection with respect to interests and skills is not relevant. However, depending on the initial level of interest, political education has a varying effect, which we consider in our empirical analyses.

ⁱⁱ These two main types of higher secondary education cover over 80% of this age cohort in Switzerland (Federal Office of Statistics, Education Statistics 2014; Beyeler et al. 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ Vocational education and training within the federal vocational baccalaureate program exist in both forms, i.e., as (short) full-time and part-time education.

^{iv} The canton of Thurgovia is the only canton in which we were not allowed to conduct our survey. Moreover, Appenzell Inner Rhodes does not have a vocational school, so we could only survey the students in general education.

^v For example, these different occupations (in vocational schools) and areas of concentration include Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Languages, Pedagogis/Psychology/Philosophy, etc.

^{vi} By measuring parental education based on student reported education levels, we follow a standard practice in education research (Schulz 2005). It has been shown that students are

quite well able to broadly indicate the educational level of their parents, e.g., whether their parents have a university degree or a very low level of education, while they may have problems in providing more fine-grained information (Schulz 2005). We consider this conclusion for the operationalization of our variables. On the one hand, we provided a rather rough educational scale to students distinguishing basically between mandatory school, apprenticeship or full time vocational school, Gymnasium or Seminar for teachers, higher vocational education and a university degree. On the other hand, we then recoded this information into two dummy variables, one accounting for parents with a low education (no education or just mandatory school) and the other taking the value of 1 if the parents have high educational attainments (a university degree or higher vocational education; see also Appendix II) – i.e., the two categories that may be reported by students most consistently and moreover captures the theoretically most important differentiation. Previous research also illustrates that even though such student reported information on parents' educational level may still involve some measurement errors, these inconsistencies did not have a substantial impact on estimation results in statistical models (Schulz 2005). Hence, given the high theoretical relevance of parental education and for want of *parent* reported information, we consider our variables to be an acceptable measure for the phenomenon of interest.

^{vii} Since teacher variables were not found to be relevant in former models, we did not include these variables in subsequent estimations.

^{viii} We also tested for school type-specific models. However, we did not observe any systematic differences regarding interaction effects.

^{ix} Whereas in our models teacher variables were not significantly related to students' political interest, this also implies that the focus should be laid on what teachers actually do in the classroom and less on who they are, i.e., their personal characteristics.

Table 1: Number of students surveyed by language region and school type

	German	Latin (French and Italian)	<i>Total</i>
Vocational education			
VET	301	93	394
FVB	859	311	1170
General education	1105	421	1526
<i>Total</i>	2265	825	3090

Note: Number of students surveyed in our final sample (excluding missing values). VET = Vocational education and training; FVB = Federal Vocational Baccalaureate.

Table 2: Dimensions of political education in the school curricula at the upper secondary level

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Description</i>
Knowledge	Knowledge about political institutions and the political system; Swiss politics; international politics; and economic, societal and legal aspects.
Skills	Development of skills, i.e., the competences to judge (“Urteilskompetenzen”), the competences to act (“Handlungskompetenzen”), and factual competences (“Sachkompetenzen”).
Arousing interest	Arouse interest for politics and politically relevant aspects.

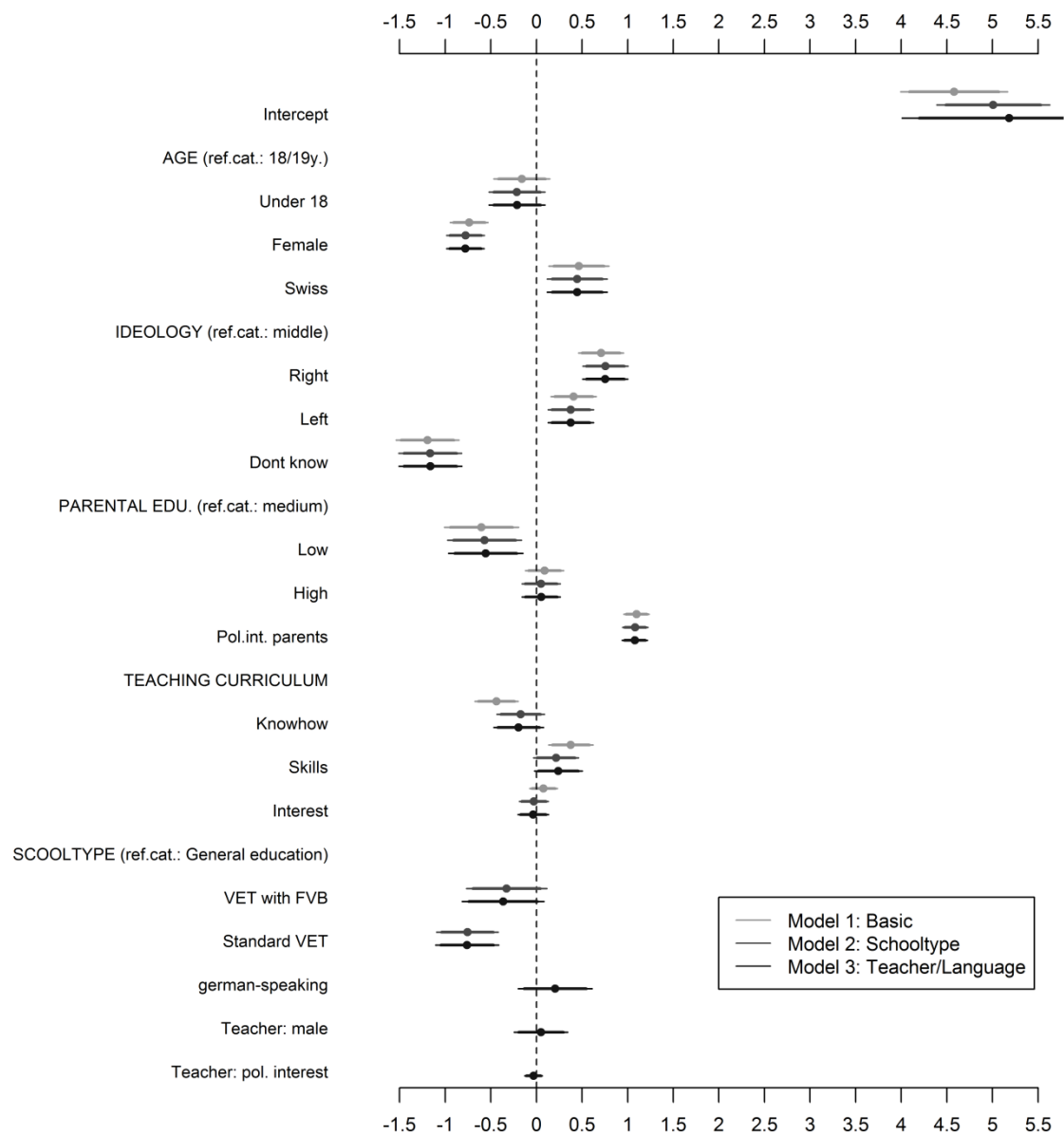
Note: For detailed description of the subdimensions and indicators, see XX (2017).

Table 3: Three dimensions of political education in the school curriculum by school type and language region

	Knowledge	Skills	Interest
School types			
General education	-0.23	-0.02	0.34
Vocational education and training with FVB	-0.19	-0.16	-0.44
Standard vocational education and training	0.43	0.07	-0.29

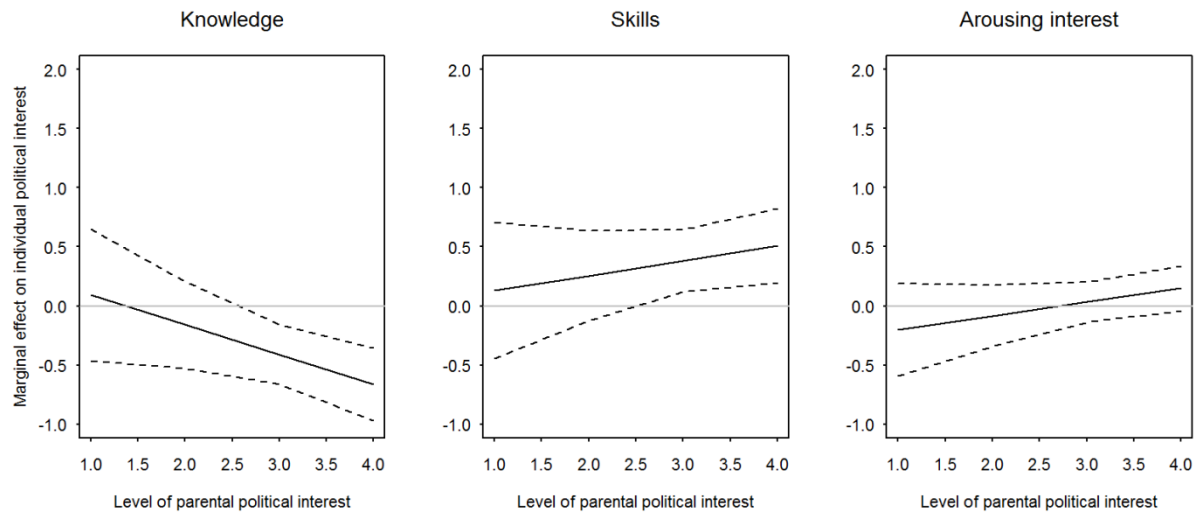
Note: Mean of the three political education indicators by school type. Since the variables are z-standardized, values above zero stand for a strong integration of the respective dimension in the school curricula, whereas values below zero indicate that this dimension is present in these curricula at an under-average level.

Figure 1: Individual and contextual determinants of political interest among young people



Note: Coefficients and standard errors from multilevel models using *lmer* in R. Number of observations: N individual = 3,090, N class = 237, N canton = 25.

Figure 2: Moderating effects of political education on the relationship between parental and students' political interest



Note: Predicted values of individual political interest based on multilevel models using *lmer* in R.